



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 21 | Number 2 | Issue 80, Winter

Article 39

Winter 10-15-1996

J.R.R. Tolkien and the Clerihew

Joe R. Christopher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Christopher, Joe R. (1996) "J.R.R. Tolkien and the Clerihew," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 39.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/39>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

J.R.R. Tolkien and the Clerihew

Abstract

The clerihew, a form of light verse, is part of Tolkien's *oeuvre*. This study offers (1) a brief history and an elaborate definition of the genre, (2) a discussion of the clerihews that have been written about Tolkien or his works, and (3) an analysis of the clerihews that Tolkien wrote.

Additional Keywords

Owen Barfield; Edmund Clerihew Bentley; G.K. Chesterton; clerihew; Nevill Coghill; Grimalkin; Dr. Robert E. Havard; Sir. Robert Helpmann; C.S. Lewis; Fr. Gervase Mathew; J.R.R. Tolkien; Charles Williams

J.R.R. Tolkien and the Clerihew

Joe R. Christopher

Abstract: The clerihew, a form of light verse, is part of Tolkien's *oeuvre*. This study offers (1) a brief history and an elaborate definition of the genre, (2) a discussion of the clerihews that have been written about Tolkien or his works, and (3) an analysis of the clerihews that Tolkien wrote.

Keywords: Owen Barfield, Edmund Clerihew Bentley, G.K. Chesterton, clerihew, Nevill Coghill, Grimalkin, Dr. Robert E. Havard, Sir Robert Helpmann, C.S. Lewis, Fr. Gervase Mathew, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams.

I. The Generic Background

When Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875-1949) was sixteen, according to his autobiography, or possibly seventeen or eighteen, he wrote

Sir Humphrey [*sic*] Davy
Was not fond of gravy[.]
He lived in the odium
Of having discovered sodium.

At the time, Bentley was attending St. Paul's School in London. His school friends – G.K. Chesterton, L.R.F. Oldershaw, W.P.H. d'Avigdor and Maurice Solomon – as well as Chesterton's father, contributed verses of the same sort to the notebook, which is dated September 1893. This notebook has since been published as *The First Clerihews*.

Before the form is defined, an artistic point may be made. When Bentley collected his first verse in *Biography for Beginners* in 1905, the second line was revised to "Abominated gravy." Then, when he quoted the verse in his autobiography, *Those Days* (1940), the second line reads "Detested gravy." These are improvements. "Was not fond of" is acceptable as a litote, but it is a group of monosyllables, which makes for a weak line. "Abominated" is more forceful, but it does not tie into the rest of the quatrain. "Detested" alliterates on its weak, first syllable with "Davy" and with the unaccented, first syllable of "discovered". The only weakness of "Detested" as compared to "Abominated" is that it has the same metrical pattern as the first line (an iamb – X / – and an amphibrach – X / X – in each). As is apparent from a reading of Bentley's clerihews, no repeated metrics are intended.

The books of Bentley's clerihews are these:

Biography for Beginners (1905),
More Biography (1929),
Baseless Biography (1939)
Clerihews Complete (1951)
The Complete Clerihews of E. Clerihew Bentley (1981,
rev. 1983).

Clerihews Complete, compiled by Bentley's editor after Bentley's death, lacked over thirty published verses. With the revision, *The Complete Clerihews* is complete, except for

ninety of Bentley's early attempts which he did not remember, or wish to print, from that early notebook:

The First Clerihews (1982).

The other authors' contributions to this volume remind a reader that there have been many imitations of Bentley's works; the most easily available collection (and probably the best) is an anthology edited by Gavin Ewart:

Other People's Clerihews (1983).

A very pleasant survey of these books is William A.S. Sarjeant's "E.C. Bentley, G.K. Chesterton, and the Clerihew".

Perhaps two other clerihews, set beside that on Sir Humpry Davy, will be enough to establish the type. Then the rules can be given. The first appeared in *Biography for Beginners*:

The people of Spain think Cervantes
Equal to half a dozen Dantes:
An opinion resented most bitterly
By the people of Italy.

And then one from *Baseless Biography*:

Lewis Carroll
Bought sumptuous apparel
And built an enormous palace
Out of the profits of *Alice*.

The first of these two (which, by the way, *The First Clerihews* shows was written in its first version by G.K. Chesterton) is built on rhetorical parallelism: "The people of Spain . . . the people of Italy." It also uses an off-rhyme in *bitterly* and *Italy*. The most likely stress pattern in the verse suggests the lines have, respectively, three, four, three, and two stresses. The second is notable for its alliteration: the two verbs – *bought* and *built* – being emphasised by their plosive *b*'s; the *p*'s of the stressed syllables in *apparel*, *palace*, and *profits* tying together the last three lines; the near-alliteration of *out* and *Alice* in the last line helping the emphatic close.

At this point the rules of the verse form may be identified:

- (1) The clerihew, named after E.C. Bentley's middle name, is a type of light verse.
- (2) The verse form is that of a quatrain with two rhyming (or occasionally off-rhyming) couplets. Jaques

Barzun, in his poem on the clerihew titled "The Muse is Speaking", sums up this aspect this way:

[The] strange but rigorous rhymes in pairs
Impress the memory unawares.

Both the couplets and the four lines are important. *Other People's Clerihews*, in a section at the rear, has some five- and six-line sports; but they are obviously not what Bentley intended (even though some of them are by his son Nicholas). Bentley himself wrote two monorhyming clerihews, but one of those he suppressed when collecting *Baseless Biography*.

(3) The metre is essentially that of prose rhythms, although Bentley's examples suggest that fairly short lines, of two to four stresses, are normative. Some of the verse in *Other People's Clerihews*, in their extremely short or long lines, suggest a "sophistication" of the clerihew – a Silver Age to follow the Golden. In general, the repetition of the *same* meter (not the number of stresses, which is a different thing) is to be avoided. Further, Bentley's examples suggest that having the same number of stresses in all four lines is to be avoided. (The clerihew on Lewis Carroll, above, seems to have two, three, three and three stresses, respectively, in its four lines.) Barzun sums the meter up this way:

In clerihews it is the norm
For rhythmic anarchy to reign.

(4) The matter is biographical. This is evident from the first three titles by Bentley. It is striking that *The Complete Clerihews* does not repeat each of the first three volumes individually, but instead rearranges their contents into an alphabetical sequence by the persons discussed. Anthony Hecht and John Hollander have written that the clerihew "does for the personal name what Lear's form of the limerick . . . does for the place-name or attribute" (quoted by Gavin Ewart in his introduction to *Other People's Clerihews*). Barzun also comments on the biographical basis:

This Bentley, then, (E. C. for short)
Believed that it would be good sport
To ransack history and descant
On persons dead or still extant.

However, it is true that Bentley wrote a few semi-clerihews without names as introductions to or jacket blurbs for his volumes: just as a senryu is a haiku without a seasonal reference, so these verses cannot be accounted true clerihews. Perhaps they should be called bentleys. (This means that those verses in the "Mavericks and Sequences" section of *Other People's Clerihews* which begin with newspaper, magazine, and holiday-resort names, etc., etc., are deeply suspect. *Some* of W.A.S. Sarjeant's "Geological Clerihews" have such other material in the line with the name as to be also suspect.)

(5) The rhetorical form most commonly seen has the biographical name in the first line, although it occasionally appears in the second, as in this beginning from *More Biography*: "A man in the position / Of the Emperor Domitian . . ." Further, unlike the use of the name in a double dactyl, it need not fill a whole line by itself, although about half the time in Bentley's examples, it does. The example about Cervantes, quoted above, shows this non-full-

line use of a name. Other examples show various uses of titles and other cognomen extenders: "Alexander of Macedon" (originally in *Baseless Biography*), "Mr. Hilaire Belloc" (*Biography for Beginners*), "Sir (then Mr.) Walter Besant" (*Biography for Beginners*), "President Coolidge" (*More Biography*), "Edward the Confessor" (*Biography for Beginners*), and so on.

Barzun gives a fuller description of the four lines, although he seems to believe only the first line can contain the name:

One line invokes a well-known name,
Three more disclose, for praise or blame
In words that make one want to quote
A single vivid anecdote.

.
Line Two is factual and curt,
The Third is planned to disconcert –
A "sprung" or "contrapuntal" stab;
The varying [L]ast may clinch or jab[.]

Actually, although the Davy clerihew has a disconcerting third line (the introduction of "odium"), the Carroll clerihew does not seem to turn on that line. And the present writer does not find a common punch-line emphasis ("jab") to the fourth line in Bentley's clerihews. (Of the three models, only the one on Carroll comes close; the others' fourth lines presumably "clinch".)

(6) The tone of the clerihew, says Gavin Ewart in his introduction to *The Complete Clerihews*, is "civilised and dotty". More specifically, Bentley does not use the clerihew for satire or erotic jokes (although both appear in *Other People's Clerihews*). He suppressed one clerihew which was too biographically accurate, which suggests the title of *Baseless Biography* is to be taken seriously. (Lewis Carroll did not, in fact, spend his money frivolously, despite the above clerihew.) What Ewart meant by calling the clerihew "civilized" was that its readership should know enough of history, enough about significant biographies, to recognize the extent of fantasy in the verse. It is the audience, even more than the verse, which is civilised. Barzun sums up this question in this manner:

Debate has freely ranged as to
The needs that such reports be true.
.
We may conclude that on the whole
.
It's now maintained by very few
That *ben trovata* will not do.

Indeed, it is best to say that the clerihew is a variety of nonsense verse; it is often anachronistic ("Archbishop Laud / Saw nothing to admire in *Maud*" – *Baseless Biography*); at most, it may be said to reveal the folly of humanity – occasionally, of the historical individual named. On the other hand, it would be nice if there was *some* historical accuracy in the verse – Sir Humphry Davy *did* first obtain sodium in its metallic state; Lewis Carroll *did* make money from his *Alice* volumes. But it cannot be said that even this modicum of accuracy is *necessary* to the genre. At most, it is the normative state. As stated above, the clerihew's readership should be civilized enough to recognise the extent of the

fantasy.

Perhaps, as a comment on the sixth rule, it may be worthwhile to quote a verse which Ewart missed when collecting *Other People's Clerihews*. In his introduction to an edition of Bentley's best mystery novel, *Trent's Last Case* (1913), Aaron Marc Stein writes:

Edmund Clerihew Bentley
Made mock of his world, but gently.
He gave us, in pursuit of his creative bent,
Philip Trent.

How accurate that is! Indeed the main flaw the quatrain has as a clerihew is its accuracy. It is civilized but not dotty.

(7) None of Bentley's clerihews are given individual titles, outside of those semi-clerihews used as book introductions. In contrast, four by Edmund Wilson reprinted in the back of *Other People's Clerihews* (one is a five-line sport) have titles. Perhaps this is a trivial rule, but it does seem that Bentley did not intend for clerihews to receive individual titles. (Limericks, for the most part, are not individually titled; double dactyls normally are. One might think this the distinction between a folk art, the limerick – even if probably that of an educated folk – and an invented verse form, the double dactyl; but the clerihew indicates this is not a valid distinction.)

(8) Finally, the most trivial rule of all: Bentley's is old-fashioned verse with the first word of each line capitalized. In his introduction to *The Complete Clerihews*, Ewart quotes one of his own clerihews which does not follow this practice.

This introduction on the genre has been long and perhaps laborious, but most readers (outside of light-verse enthusiasts) do not seem to know what clerihews are. It will be the thesis of the last section that J.R.R. Tolkien did understand the genre. But first, a digression.

II. Celebrations of Tolkien

Before a consideration is given to Tolkien's own clerihews, perhaps those clerihews mentioning or alluding to Tolkien should be considered; after all, they too fit the title of this paper. At least four have been published, three of them preserved in *Other People's Clerihews*. One of these is by Robin Skelton:

William Cobbett
Never discovered a hobbit,
Although he tried
On every Rural Ride.

The "dotty" element, of course, is the introduction of hobbits into Cobbett's world; the "civilised" element is the reference to that minor but enduring work of English literature, *Rural Rides* (newspaper, 1820-30; book, 1830). The stress pattern of the syllables in the clerihew can best be shown here and later in this essay by a diagram – with X's for unstressed syllables, /'s for stressed, and occasional \ 's for secondary stresses – which a reader can, if he or she wishes, compare to the verse. The pattern which matches the above verse is

/ X / X
/ X X / X X / X
X / X /
X / X [X] / X /

The stress pattern – two, three, two, three – is perhaps too regular; but the lines are varied with the feminine endings of the first couplet and the masculine of the second. The meter is trochaic in the first line, irregular in the second (a trochee, and iamb and a third-class pæon), and iambic in the last two. Those who pronounce *every* with three syllables will make the last line an iamb, an anapest and another iamb. There is alliteration on *k* in the first two lines (*Cob-* and *-cov-*); the *r*'s of "Rural Ride" are quietly prepared for in the nearly buried *r*'s of *tried* and *every* (and perhaps earlier, in the *r*'s of the off-rhyme of "Never discovered"). In short, Skelton's verse is an excellent clerihew.

Another of the verses in *Other People's Clerihews* is this one by Joanne Hill:

J.R.R. Tolkien
Was not, on the whole, keen
On trolls made of plastic,
But he thought gnomes were fantastic.

The meter is nicely irregular, and the first line with its three initials is uncertain in scansion (which is probably a virtue). No doubt different readers will stress that first line differently. Here is one version:

\ / \ / \
X / X X //
X / X X / X
X X // X X / X

This can be described in metrical terms, but it seems not worth doing. For example, to say that the first line consists of a "heavy" iamb and a "heavy" amphibrach is accurate enough as the above markings go; but the markings show the pattern already. The main point to be made is that the pattern is irregular. The second and the third lines are the closest in pattern, but they are framed with less regular lines. Surprisingly, the main stress pattern to the lines is not as irregular as the meters: two, three, two, three.

If Hill thought that Tolkien pronounced his name TOLE-keen, then she was attempting a pure rhyme in the first couplet. *Trolls* in line three would then echo the stressed syllable of the rhyme as well as alliterate with *Tol-*. But, since Tolkien did not pronounce his name that way, the first two lines must be considered an off-rhyme.

The fantasy element in Hill's clerihew involves shifting Tolkien's trolls (as in *The Hobbit*) and dwarves (one meaning of *gnomes*) into a modern form – plastic. (Are these supposed to be yard decorations? small figurines for whatnot shelves? or what? Whatever they are, the word *plastic* is the operative term.) The assertion of Tolkien's attitudes is sheer invention, of course – that is, it is part of the fantasy element.

Hill's clerihew is not as good as Skelton's, for she has essentially written a joke (the last line is a punch line). Jokes are not whimsical biographies. A glance through *The Complete Clerihews* shows that Bentley usually makes the last two lines (not the last line) into a complete clause. Hill's grammatical structure reveals her verse's limits. (Jaques Barzun's similar confusion was discussed in the first section.)

The third, and last, of these clerihews in Ewart's anthology is by Tess van Summers, appearing in a section titled

“Australians” in the back of the book:

Helpmann (Sir Robert)

Is *not* a hobbit.

A hobbit is a species of fairy,

And its feet are not small and neat but large and hairy.

A number of nice things could be said about the mechanics of this verse (including the internal rhyme of *feet* and *neat* in the last line, although the line itself is longer than Bentley's models), but two comments about the content are more significant here. First, is the third line the deliberate “dotty” element, or is it simply a mistake on the part of the author? Since that is a question of intention, it would need contact with van Summers to answer. But the line does not have the *feel* of dottiness. One suspects that the whimsical element in the verse is simply the introduction of hobbits, beginning in the second line, into the comparison. The third line, on the other hand, is simply wrong (within Tolkien's literary universe, at any rate; perhaps not in the popular mind). Hobbits, in Middle-earth, are a species of human beings – analogous to the non-fictional pygmies in Africa. (In order not to seem naive, one may note that van Summers may be *denying* that Helpman, despite the reputation of his profession, is a homosexual; in that case, the confusion of hobbits and fairies is deliberate, for a non-Tolkienesque point.)

Second, the choice of Sir Robert Helpmann raises the question of obscurity. He is presumably the Australian-born dancer, choreographer, and actor, best known in America for his work as choreographer and main male dancer in the movie *The Red Shoes*. In *Biography for Beginners* appears a verse about Mr Alfred Beit, whom Ewart in his introduction does not identify beyond what G.K. Chesterton's drawing suggests. Marie Smith, in a note to “An Alphabet” in Chesterton's *Collected Nonsense and Light Verse* (1987), identifies Beit as “a Hamburg-born financier (reputably the world's richest man) whose wealth came from South Africa” (123). It is impressive that the world's richest man is remembered today mainly because Chesterton disliked him. There are several other clerihews by Bentley that celebrate forgotten men – although not most of his. More analogous to Helpmann than to Beit is a series of clerihews by Esther M. Friesner: “A Short Slew of SF Clerihews”, “More SF Clerihews”, and “Yet More SF Clerihews” – all in one issue of a science-fiction magazine. (Technically she writes nine clerihews and one “bentley”.) As in Australia Helpmann is common knowledge, so in the SF community, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Frank Herbert, L. Ron Hubbard, Anne McCaffrey, Larry Niven, Ursula K. Le Guin and Marion Z. Bradley (together in one verse), Arthur C. Clarke, and James Tiptree, Jr., are well known. But this is no guarantee, even if most of these authors' names are currently familiar to American SF readers, that all of them will mean much in eighty years (it has been eighty years since *Biography for Beginners*) – let alone to any general readership. In short, it would be nice if clerihews were written about people more significant to the western tradition than, say, the governors of Oklahoma. (Tolkien's clerihews are mostly limited in this way – but, then, he did not publish them. Clerihews in

manuscript for the private amusement of a group of friends are not subject to this complaint.)

The fourth of these clerihews about Tolkien was written by the present author and published, with an accidentally omitted letter, in a small journal, under the title “A Secret Vice (A Clerihew)”:

John Ronal[d] Reuel Tolkien

Listen to the Gælic (more properly, Brythonic) of a
Welsh colleen

And muttered, “The beauty of her glottology is not my
imagination hinderin' -

Aha! Sindarin!”

Perhaps a few comments can be offered about this verse without, of course – since it would be inappropriate for the present writer – any judgement about its literary worth. (One reader of the original publication raised a question about the accentuation of *Sindarin* – was it not on the second syllable instead instead of the first? The reader was arguing from a Welsh basis of the language; the writer replied that he had followed the accentuation as given in James D. Allan's *An Introduction to Elvish*.)

The use of a title is not standard with a clerihew, but this one functions in two ways. “The Secret Vice” is an essay by Tolkien, discussing the invention of private languages. Tolkien's title is suggestive, of course; presumably deliberately so. The clerihew title therefore sets up these two strains. A created private language, by Tolkien, inspired by Welsh, as indicated above, is Sindarin, one of the elvish tongues in *The Lord of the Rings*. A vice (secret or not) tied to a young woman, with a man muttering about her beauty and an unhindered imagination, should lead most readers up a garden path of mistaken associations. (The woman's “glottology” should be outside of most readers' vocabulary, so it will not affect the sexual misreading.) Whether or not it is appropriate for clerihews to play this sort of game is a different question.

The technical aspects of this verse need not be dwelt on. The rhymes are imperfect, but off-rhymes were used, occasionally, in Bentley's verses. The parenthesis in the second line perhaps gives a scholarly flavour, appropriate enough for a verse about a linguist. *Colleen* may be inexact, Irish rather than Welsh; but perhaps (again *perhaps*) it may be acceptable for the sake of the rhyme. And the long lines – the second and the third – show more of an Ogden Nash influence than one of E.C. Bentley.

Is the verse dotty enough? Certainly Tolkien was not inspired by a young woman speaking the Welsh tongue. According to Humphrey Carpenter's biography, he first became aware of the language in words printed on sides of coal-cars (“coal-trucks”) of trains (p. 26). But the real question is much like that about van Summers: is the material too limited to be worth writing and/or publishing? How many readers, even of Tolkien's books, worry about his languages? (The few who do, if one judges by their publications, worry – if that is the correct word – very much.) The literary journal which published this verse was one of the small-circulation fantasy journals, one with more of a mythopoeic orientation than Gothic. (There are a

number of small Gothic magazines, whatever that says about the reading and writing public; and very few mythic ones.) Thus, it was essentially an in-group publication.

Of these four clerihews about Tolkien or involving his Middle-earth creation, certainly the best as a traditional, pure clerihew is the first, that by Robin Skelton.

III. Tolkien's Contributions

Off hand, a reader might assume that the author of a three-volume romance is not likely also to be the author of four-line light verses. Surely a writer's imagination is likely to work at one scale or the other – not both? Whatever the likelihood, Tolkien wrote both *The Lord of the Rings* and at least six clerihews.

A reader might notice also that a number of Tolkien's verses in his major works are light verses – though not clerihews. For example, Frodo's song about the cow jumping over the moon (an "explanation" of the nursery rhyme) is not a type of serious poetry (*The Lord of the Rings*, Bk. 1, Ch. 9). Thus, among Tolkien's variety of styles and modes, light verse is one type.

Six clerihews were mentioned above; but there is in addition one bentley, or quasi-bentley, which makes a good place to begin. When *The Lord of the Rings* was published, the reviews tended to be either high praise or equally high condemnation. Tolkien summed it up in a quatrain which Humphrey Carpenter quotes in his biography (p. 223):

The Lord of the Rings
is one of those things:
if you like it you do:
if you don't, then you boo!

Whether or not Tolkien intended a bentley (a clerihew with, in this case, a book title instead of a person's name) is not certain. This verse violates three rules: (3) the meter is too regular, (6) the tone, while light, is not dotty enough, and (8) the first words of the second through fourth lines are not capitalized. All four lines have two beats each:

X / X X /
X / X X /
X X / X X /
X X / X X /

Obviously, the rhythm of the first two lines is identical, as is that of the latter two; except for the addition of an unstressed syllable at the first of the latter two, the stress pattern of the whole poem is the same. The only variation is that the *cæsuræ* fall differently in the second couplet: after the fourth syllable in the third line and after the third in the fourth. It seems dubious that a difference in placement of *cæsuræ* is a sufficient substitute for accentual rhythms, although it does affect how the lines sound, of course.

The light tone of this quatrain is due to the colloquial language: "one of those things" and "boo!" But there is nothing dotty here. The split reaction to Tolkien was a fact. Tolkien sums up the facts lightly but objectively.

If Tolkien's quatrain is a dubious bentley, at least it is worth considering. But there is no doubt about Tolkien's six clerihews. Four of these are quoted by Carpenter in *The Inklings* – appropriately enough, for Tolkien wrote his series

of clerihews about his friends in that literary circle.

The first printed by Carpenter (p. 177) is on Doctor Robert E. Havard:

Dr U.Q. Humphrey
Made poultices of comfrey.
If you didn't pay his bills
He gave you doses of squills.

Carpenter gives the background of the pseudonym earlier in his book:

For some reason Havard . . . always attracted nicknames from the Inklings . . . he was once referred to by Hugo Dyson as "Humphrey", either in pure error or because it alliterated with his surname. [Lewis in 1943 used *Humphrey* for a doctor in Ch. 2 of *Perelandra*.] Some time later, Warnie Lewis was irritated one evening by Havard's failure to turn up with a car and give him a promised lift home, and dubbed the doctor "a useless quack"; and "The Useless Quack" or "U.Q." Havard . . . remained.
(p. 130)

("The Red Admiral" was another nickname [p. 177], though not significant here.) Typical of these clerihews but more extreme than the others, the above verse is an in-group comment. The sixth rule about the "civilized" aspects said that the audience needed to know enough history to recognise the dottiness of the clerihew: but there is no way for a reader to know about a pseudonymous minor doctor, significant mainly for his membership in the Inklings and for his note on a doctor's view of pain in Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (1940). As was said about the Helpmann clerihews in the second section, the subject of a clerihew needs to be someone recognisable. (As was also said, Tolkien did not publish his clerihews, so *he* cannot be blamed for their flaw; but a critic must point out that the verse itself is limited in comparison to the better clerihews.)

The diction about Humphrey is interesting. What is *comfrey*? What are *squills*? It is typical of Tolkien's vocabulary that these are actual words. *Comfrey*, which may suggest a humorous version of *comfort*, actually refers to a plant (of the borage family) with coarse, hairy leaves. All of a sudden the medicine seems less appetising. The squills are equally interesting, for Tolkien seems to be making a double reference here. This plant, also called a sea onion, has bulbs which are sometimes dried and sliced – and used medicinally as a heart stimulant, as an expectorant, and as a diuretic. More sinister is the use of a red variety of squills as a rat poison. Tolkien's use of *dose* suggests the diuretic, but one cannot be *certain* which variety he meant.

The meter of this clerihew is acceptable: three of the four lines seem to have, three (major) stresses, and the other line, two stresses.

/ X / \ / X
X / X X X / X
X X / X / X /
X / X / X X /

There will be some variation simply from individual readings, of course. Does *Q* receive only a secondary stress? Will someone give a secondary stress to the last syllable of

poultices? Will someone else stress *If*? A rather British reading has been assumed here, with minor syllables (*-ces*, *If*) swallowed.

Another technique, alliteration, ties the verse together, although it does not seem thematically significant: *Doctor, didn't, doses; poultices, pay*.

The second clerihew, since all of these are about members of the Inklings, picks another:

Mr Owen Barfield's
Habit of turning cartwheels
Made some say: "He's been drinking!"
It was only "conscientious thinking".

Barfield is better known than Havard, since Barfield has published a number of philosophic and/or anthroposophic books; but he can hardly be said to be widely known.

Carpenter explains the background of this clerihew:

The cartwheels were of an intellectual sort, and "conscientious thinking" was one of Barfield's terms for the thought processes related to Anthroposophy. (1979, p. 177)

Would intellectual cartwheels cause people to think the thinker was drunk? Maybe. On the other hand, physical cartwheels would be more certain to excite viewers. It may be significant that Barfield, in his younger years, "thought at one time of earning his living as a dancer" (Carpenter, 1979, p. 33). Perhaps he had turned cartwheels then and the fact came up at an Inklings's meeting. (A person *might* celebrate Anthroposophy with cartwheels, Tolkien can be imagined as assuming.) But both Carpenter's interpretation and the present writer's quibbles are taking the clerihew seriously. Perhaps it would be best to take the cartwheels as the dotty aspect of the verse. Barfield is imagined as doing something that he, as a London solicitor, would not be doing (The "*Habit of . . . cartwheel[ing]*", if taken seriously, could only be an intellectual habit; if taken dottily, it is at the level of Edward Lear's Old Man of Whitehaven who danced a quadrille with a raven.)

This clerihew has little significant alliteration: *Owen* and *only*, but three lines apart; *Habit* and *It* under medieval rules of vowel alliteration, but dubious to the modern ear. "[S]ome say" causes the uncertainty of the meter in the third line; tied together by alliteration, the two syllables sound like a spondee – but what are they in the context of the line? Five monosyllables in a row at the first of the line allow for several readings.

The meter is varied:

/ X / X / X
/ X X / X / X
X / X / X / X
X X / X / X \ X / X

The first line is a trochaic trimeter; the second line is close to the same, but with a dactyl for the first trochee; the third line has all those single-syllable words but it is here scanned as two iambs and an amphibrach; the fourth line has a couple of uncertainties – some readers may add a stress on *It*, some may drop the secondary accent on *-ent-*, but it is here marked as an anapest, two iambs (the second a "light" iamb), and an amphibrach. The number of stresses in this scansion runs

three, three, three, and four.

The third clerihew is also about a lesser Inklings (better known than Havard but less well known than Barfield):

The Rev. Mathew (Gervase)
Made inaudible surveys
Of little-read sages
In the dark Middle Ages.
(Carpenter, 1979, p. 186)

Carpenter writes about this one that "This was entirely true, for Gervase Mathew was an expert on English medieval history . . ." Also he

talked in a kind of breathless mutter, speaking at such speed that even Tolkien, until then the champion among the Inklings for haste and inaudibility, was left far behind.
(p. 186)

Of course, what Carpenter does not seem to realise is that the statement "This [is] entirely true" is damning when applied to a clerihew. (If there is any wit or whimsey in the verse, it lies in the mixing of the Dark Ages and Middle Ages in "dark Middle Ages"; Tolkien would have known the distinction, of course.)

Again, the technique is satisfactory. The alliteration is more elaborate than in the last clerihew – *Reverend, read; Mathew, Made, Middle; -audible, Ages; surveys, sages*. In fact, the only stressed syllables that do not alliterate are the first of *little, In* (if it is stressed), and *dark*. The weakness of the verse is in Tolkien's tendency to trimeter lines:

X / X X / X / X
/ X / X X / X
X / X // X
X X // X / X

(In this scansion the *In* of the fourth line is not stressed.) It is possible, however to read "little-read sage-" as / X X / and "dark Middle Age-" as an identical / X X /, instead of / X // and // X /, respectively, as here; that would give two trimeter lines and two dimeter lines.

This clerihew has a historically interesting background. Those of Tolkien's readers who only know his works through such books as *The Inklings* and those by Tolkien himself do not tend to think of the original situation of Tolkien in Oxford, for example, reciting his verses to friends. To the Inklings, of course; but surely, the readers think, they were nearly isolated. However, evidence exists that this verse got into the oral culture of Oxford. Luke Rigby, O.S.B., in an essay titled "A Solid Man" (1979), repeats a clerihew he heard while a student there:

Father Gervase
Makes inaudible surveys
On little-known sages
Of the Middle Ages.
(p. 40)

One notable characteristic of the oral tradition is apparent here: the verse has been simplified. The reversal of the name in the first line is eliminated; the second line is made present tense; the phrasing of the third line is shifted from the unexpected "little-read" to the more common "little-known"; and the fourth line loses its clever adjective *dark*.

But what is amusing about this example is that it is attributed not to Tolkien but to C.S. Lewis. Rigby's essay appears in James T. Como's anthology "*C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*" and *Other Reminiscences*. Rigby introduces the clerihew with these words, "It is one of those quirks of memory that I recall a clerihew said to have been Mr. Lewis's on Father Gervase" (p. 40). If his memory is right about the attribution, it may be that Lewis heard the verse from Tolkien and quoted it in some public situation – and it was thereafter repeated as by him. (But anyone can invent other possible scenarios for the mistaken attribute – including just someone's poor memory.) Whatever the origin, this is a case in which – unlike that of some folk ballads – the oral transmission has not improved the poem as a poem.

There is a fourth clerihew about one of the lesser Inklings – Nevill Coghill – who is best known for his verse translation of Chaucer. This one was quoted by Tolkien himself in a letter to W.H. Auden. "The only thing I have ever written about Neville [*sic*] was:

Mr Neville [*sic*] Judson Coghill
Wrote a deal of dangerous doggeril [*sic*].
Practical, progressive men
Called him Little Poison-pen."
(Tolkien, 1981, p. 359, No. 275)

Tolkien explains the content in his letter:

That was at a time when under the name of Judson he was writing what I thought very good and funny verses lampooning forward-looking men like [Sir Cyril] Norwood [, President] of St John's [College, Oxford, and author of a then-significant report on education].
(p. 359)

Despite Tolkien's difficulties in spelling *Nevill* and *doggerel*, there is nothing in the clerihew which seems dotty. "Judson" is added to Coghill's name, but that (while typical of the Inklings' liking for nicknames) seems to have been Coghill's own invention. Probably Coghill being called "Little Poison-pen" is Tolkien's creation; but the lampoons, as the above comment affirms, were factual – and a lampooner or a satirist may well be described in the cliché *poison pen*. In short, the clerihew is too factual to be first rate.

The form is acceptably irregular:

/ X / X / X / X
/ X / X / X X / X X
/ X X X / X /
/ X / X / X /

The stresses are four, four, three, four.

In addition to the interesting off-rhyme of *Coghill* and *doggerel*, the verse has some nice alliterative syllables: *deal*, *dan[j]*-, and *dog-* in the second line, and *Prac-*, *po-*, and *pen* in the third and fourth lines, with *pro-* in an unstressed syllable. (The framing alliteration of *Cog-* and *called* is probably too far apart for anyone's ear.) The "liquid" *l*'s, usually in unstressed syllables, also help the verse's flow: *Nevill*, *Coghill*, *doggerel*, *practical*, *called*, and *Little*. These aspects seem much better than the factuality.

The next clerihew cannot be blamed for having factuality:

The sales of Charles Williams

Leapt up by millions,
When a reviewer surmised
He was only Lewis disguised.
(Carpenter, 1979, p. 187)

Indeed, with names of both Williams and C.S. Lewis, this clerihew cannot be blamed for being on minor figures like the earlier ones, either. (It is surprising that Tolkien seems to have not written a clerihew just about Lewis – his best friend among the Inklings – but perhaps this one was supposed to be sufficient. Or perhaps his clerihew on Lewis has not been published.)

Carpenter seems to take the wrong attitude on the factuality. He described the impulse for the verse:

In the summer of 1943 Williams's book on Dante and Romantic Theology, *The Figure of Beatrice*, was published. Tolkien wrote [the above clerihew, the contents of which were] deliberate nonsense, for the book did not sell vastly and it did not remotely resemble anything Lewis had written.
(1979, p. 187)

The clerihew should be celebrated for its "deliberate nonsense," its whimsy, its dottiness, not explained away.

The form of the verse is good. The lines are varied in meter, if not so certainly in number of accents.

X / X // X
// X / X
X X X / X X /
X X / X / X X /

Some readers will probably stress the *When* in the third line and so produce four lines of trimeters, instead of three, as here. Or perhaps the *When* should have a secondary accent, and so the line should be \ X X / X X /. The only weakness in the meter (as contrasted to the number of stresses) is that both the third and fourth lines end with anapests. (There is almost no alliteration tying the stresses together – *-mil-* and *-mised*; the vowel pattern of *up*, *He*, and *on-*.)

The final clerihew appeared in another letter – and, as Tolkien writes it there, it violates the eighth rule about capitalization. More significantly, it is on the third significant Inklings, Tolkien himself:

J.R.R. Tolkien
had a cat called Grimalkin:
once a familiar of Herr Grimm
now he spoke the law to him.
(Tolkien, 1981, p. 398)

Since Tolkien simply adds it as a postscript to one of his letters (No. 309), there is no context available; but a few things may be said about it.

The rhyme of the first two lines is not perfect: TALL-keen and -MAEL-kin or -MOL-kin. But it is close enough for Tolkien's purposes. The choice of this name is what is interesting. The name derives from *grey* + *malkin*. *Malkin* itself usually means a woman, being a variety of *Matilda* or *Maud*. But *grimalkin* usually refers to a cat, especially a she-cat, although occasionally a woman. (Tolkien uses the masculine pronoun for this cat in his fourth line.)

Since this cat is a supernatural being – a familiar – it is notable that the first discovered use of a form of *grimalkin* is

in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1605), "I come, Gray-Malkin", where the line refers to a fiend. Of course, Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic, does not mean anything serious by saying that he and Jakob Grimm before him had the same familiar – that is the dotty or whimsical aspect of this clerihew. (It is possible that Tolkien's interest in Grimalkin was aroused by John Masefield's *The Midnight Folk*, a children's book of 1927, where there are two evil cats – who reform at the end of the book – named Blackmalkin and Greymalkin. ". . . Greymalkin, that mysterious cat, who was so seldom seen" (p. 160), has the lesser role, probably because *black* suggests a greater evil. However, Tolkien's spelling of *Grimalkin* shows that he is not limited to Masefield and Shakespeare.)

The law that is spoken could be taken as some sort of supernatural rule or simply the stubbornness of cats demanding food, for example; but the actual reference no doubt is to a philological rule about the changes in the Indo-European language when German developed out of it (such as the initial IE *p* becoming a *f*, as in the Latin *pisces* and the English *fish*, or *pater* and *father*). This rule is known as Grimm's Law.

Did the familiar inspire Grimm with the law, or did Grimm teach it to his cat? Given the ambiguous pronouns, did Grimalkin recite the Law to Tolkien or *vice versa*? (Under the general rule of thumb that a pronoun refers back to the most immediate noun, presumably the former – but it is not quite certain.)

The clerihew has an uncertain meter in the first two lines. As has been said of an earlier clerihew, it is difficult to know how one should read those opening initials. Here is one version of the four lines:

```

\ / \ / \
X X / \ X / X
\ X X / X X //
/ X / X / X /

```

So the major stresses are varied: two, two, three, four – and the rhythms are equally varied.

In addition to the one alliteration noted above, there is a consonance tying together the second and third lines. *-mal-* and *-mil-*, and an alliteration connecting the third and fourth lines, *Herr* and *him*. In this poem, one unstressed syllable is important: the *gr* of *Grimalkin* echoes the sound in the stressed syllable *Grimm*. This alliteration not only ties lines together but connects two of the important terms. (Perhaps, since the first of these names comes from *grey-malkin* – presumably an anti-bacchius – *gri-* has a secondary accent here, not being an ordinary unaccented syllable.)

This final clerihew is obviously an interesting one, since a major romance writer (and expert philologist) composes it about himself; the use of a cat as a familiar seems almost too strong a supernatural note to just be dottiness, but it is reduced (for most readers) by the shift to a philological law as the basis for the conversation between the familiar and the – so to speak – wizard.

What may be said ultimately about Tolkien as a clerihew writer? Perhaps four things. First, as has been said, Tolkien's clerihews are too much of an in-group production to be great. Dr. Havard, Fr. Mathew, and Nevill Coghill are not

significant historical figures. Owen Barfield is marginal: there are those who think he is of major importance in the history of ideas, but he certainly is not widely known to the public. Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien himself are significant enough to meet the criterion of the clerihew being civilized – the reader should be able to read the verse and recognise the dottiness.

Second, these clerihews show Tolkien's sense of humour. The author himself wrote in a letter, "I . . . have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome)" (1981, p. 289). Perhaps the dottiness of these six verses, at the best, is not the same as the simplicity he mentions here – which may refer to obvious peripeteiæ. If not, these clerihews at least indicate one extension of Tolkien's sense of humour.

Third, these six verses show Tolkien's delight in poetic genres and forms. Perhaps this is not Tolkien's reputation because he does not write sonnets, blank verse, terza rima, sestinas, or rime royal. But many of these forms were French or Italian in origin, and it is no surprise that Tolkien does not touch those. But his use of verse genres is extensive; a few examples: (a) the verse of the Rohirrim (*The Lord of the Rings*, Bk. V., Chs. 5-6), as has often been said, is based on Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse; (b) the ballad of the troll (*The Lord of the Rings*, Bk. I., Ch. 12) is written to the English folk tune of "The Fox and the Hens", as was first pointed out by George Sayer; (c) the octosyllabic couplets of "The Lay of Leithian" are a standard romance form in medieval England, as in "Sir Orfeo" (they were also used in France, by Chrétien de Troyes, for example, but Tolkien would not have been influenced by that); (d) "Namárië" (*The Lord of the Rings*, Bk. II., Ch. 8) was sung by Tolkien to a Gregorian chant, and this was written down by Donald Swann for his *The Road Goes Ever On: A Song Cycle* (1967). All of these are medieval forms: but Tolkien was obviously not against a modern English form – the clerihew. His use of this light-verse form does not extend his reputation as a poet, but it does as a versifier.

Fourth and finally, two of Tolkien's clerihews, as has been said, are significant in the genre. But also they, and indeed the one on Barfield in addition, are amusing – which is one purpose of light verse. This assertion, of course, cannot be proved, for it is a matter of taste. But Barfield, a London solicitor, turning cartwheels, is a traditional example of humour; the verse on Williams and Lewis may be taken either as nonsense (as it was presented earlier) or as a satire on the ineptitude of London reviewers – its ambivalence, between either sheer humour or ironic humour, may be part of its appeal; and the verse on the author himself is perhaps too mysterious to be a good clerihew, but the play with Grimm's law produces a surprising shift from witchcraft to philology and in that sense may be humorous.

In short, Tolkien's contribution to Edmund Clerihew Bentley's genre may not be great; but they are at least interesting for what they say about Tolkien's sensibilities, for what they reveal (in two cases) as good examples of the genre, and for what they contribute (in three cases) toward the reader's amusement.

Appendix: The Rules of the Clerihew

The following rules (as given in the first section of this essay) are based on E.C. Bentley's practices.

1. The clerihew, named after E.C. Bentley's middle name, is a type of light verse.
2. The verse form is that of a quatrain written with two rhyming (or occasionally off-rhyming) couplets.
3. The meter is essentially that of prose rhythms, although Bentley's practices suggest that fairly short lines, of two to four stresses, are normative.
4. The matter is biographical. This author proposes the name of "bentleys" for non-biographical clerihews.
5. The rhetorical form most commonly seen has the biographical name (with or without modification) in the first line, although it occasionally appears in the second; the fourth line is not normally a punch-line – indeed, the third and fourth lines are normally one clause.
6. The tone of the clerihew, says Gavin Ewart, is "civilised and dotty"; more specifically, the clerihew is not used for satire or erotic jokes ("civilized"), and the biographical information is not to be completely accurate – that is, the clerihew is a variety of nonsense verse ("dotty").
7. None of Bentley's clerihews are given individual titles, outside of a few semi-clerihews – "bentleys" – used as book introductions.
8. The most trivial rule of all: the first word of each line is to be capitalized.

References

- Allan, Jim *et al.* 1978. *An Introduction to Elvish*. Hayes, Middlesex: Bran's Head Books.
- Barzun, Jacques. 1985. "The Muse is Speaking" in *The Clerihews of Paul Horgan*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. Reprinted in *The Chesterton Review* 13:4 (November 1987) pp. 549-50.
- Bentley, E. Clerihew, *et al.* 1982. *The First Clerihews*. Illus. G.K. Chesterton. Various prefatory material. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bentley, E. Clerihew. 1983. *The Complete Clerihews of E. Clerihew Bentley*. Rev. ed. Intro. Gavin Ewart. Illus. by Nicholas Bentley *et al.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. 1977. *Tolkien: A biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. 1979. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their friends*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Chesterton, G.K. 1987. "An Alphabet" in *Collected Nonsense and Light Verse*. Ed. Marie Smith. London: Xanadu Publications, pp. 122-23.
- Christopher, Joe R. 1987. "A Secret Vice (A Clerihew)" in *The Mythic Circle*. No. 3, Late Summer 1987, p.27.
- Ewart, Gavin, ed. 1983. *Other People's Clerihews*. Illus. Nicola Jennings. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Friesner, Esther M. 1986. "A Short Slew of SF Clerihews", "More SF Clerihews" and "Yet More SF Clerihews" in *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*. 60:2/526 (January 1986): pp. 100, 105, 129, respectively.
- Masefield, John. 1927. *The Midnight Folk*. Reprinted, New York: Dell, 1985.
- Rigby, Luke, O. B. S. 1979. "A Solid Man" in "*C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*" and *Other Reminiscences*. Ed. James T. Como. New York: Macmillan, pp 38-40.
- Sarjeant, William A.S. 1983. "The Geological Clerihew" in *Geolog* 12:4 (1983), pp. 38-40.
- Sarjeant, William A.S. 1984. "A Mélange of Geological Clerihews" in *Geolog* 13:4 (1984), pp. 34-36.
- Sarjeant, William A.S. 1985. "Clerihews" in *Geolog* 14:4 (1985), pp. 32-33.
- Sarjeant, William A.S. 1987. "E.C. Bentley, G.K. Chesterton and the Clerihew" in *The Chesterton Review*. 13:2 (May 1987), pp. 176-191.
Letters in subsequent issues discussing his essay: Kevin Dean, "A David Jones Special Issue?" 13:3 (August 1987), pp. 421-22; Eric Yates, "More Clerihews", p. 422; Darlene Kelly "Chesterton and 'Doctor Parker'" 13:4 (November 1987), pp. 559-560; William A.S. Sarjeant, [untitled], 14:2 (May 1988), 310-14; Canon Dr. M.W. Dewar, p. 314; Professor John Ferguson, p. 315.
- Sarjeant, William A.S. 1989. "The Jurassic Clerihew" in *Stuifmail* 7:3 (Dec. 1989), p. 52. (Largely a reprint of Sarjeant, 1985.)
- Sayer, George. 1975. [untitled note on the record jacket] *J.R.R. Tolkien reads and sings his The Hobbit and The Fellowship of the Ring*. Caedmon Records, No. TC 1477.
- Stein, Aaron Mark. 1977. "Introduction" in *Trent's Last Case* by E.C. Bentley. Illus. Darrel Millsap. Various editorial material. San Diego: University Extension, University of California at San Diego, in co-operation with Del Mar: Publisher's Inc., pp. ix-xxv.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1981. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1984. "A Secret Vice" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 198-223.